The Sharavana, Ila and Sudyumna

Sharavana: the enchanted forest of reeds

This happens in an age beyond Time. Lord Shiva falls in love with a beautiful damsel called Uma and marries her. They now spend all their time in a heavenly forest called Sharavana. So intense is their passion and love for each other that the world ceases to exist for them.

Now, it so happens that some great sages are out in search of their Lord, Shiva. They search for Him in Kailash and all the other mountain ranges. One fine day they reach Sharavana with the hope that they will find their lord. They do find Him. But they are acutely embarrassed to see Shiva in an intimate embrace with Parvati. The sages look away immediately and rush to Badari ka ashram, which is the home of Nara and Narayan.

Parvati, however, is distraught because Shiva had done nothing to prevent such things from happening. And Shiva, in order to pacify Parvati, declares that henceforth Sharavana would be their forest of love. And any male who enters that forest would instantly be transformed into a woman. Parvati is happy because she will never be embarrassed again.

People who were aware of this kept away from Sharavana. But others who unknowingly entered the forest turned into their feminine forms and remained in that form till they died.

Brahma’s Manasputras

In a different realm, a Kalpa has ended. The universe has dissolved. And only Vishnu reclines on Sesha, on the Kshirasagara.

And slowly, out of Vishnu’s navel, a stalk with a golden lotus emerges. It unfolds and Brahma, the creator starts populating the world with all kinds of creatures.

He creates Marichi first and then Kashyapa. Kashyapa sires several children. Vivaswan, Surya- the Sun god, is one of his children. Vivaswan sires a son called Sraddha Deva.

Sraddha Deva & his wife Sraddha

Sraddha Deva, also known as Vaivaswata Manu, marries a woman called Sraddha. She bears him ten sons. The eldest of these ten sons is Ikshvaku.

But much before Sraddha gives birth to Ikshvaku, she fails to conceive for several years. Sraddha Deva is anxious. He wants an heir who will inherit his kingdom. So he seeks the counsel of his guru Vashishta. Vashishta says that Sraddha Deva will be blessed by a son if he performs a Putrakama Yagna and invokes the Gods Mitra and Varuna. So Sraddha Deva initiates the yagna without any further delay.

Sraddha, his wife, however, yearns for a daughter. So she quietly goes to the priest who chants the mantras during the yagna and tells him that she wishes to have a daughter and not a son. The priest chants the appropriate mantras to fulfil her wish for a daughter. As a result, a daughter is born to them after the yagna is complete. Sraddha is delighted and names her daughter Ila.

But Sraddha Deva is unhappy. He goes to Vashishta and says, “You, O guru are a Brahmana well versed in the Vedas. You have complete mastery over the mantras. You knew, very well, that we wished to have a son. We performed a Putrakama Yagna for that very reason. Why then have we been blessed by a daughter, Ila, instead of a son?”

Vashishta looks at Sraddha Deva calmly and says, “I will use my punya and see that you have a son.” Sraddha Deva is astonished. He wonders how his guru Vashishta could do that because the yagna was complete and he had already been blessed with a daughter.

Vashishta just smiles at him. He then focuses his mind on Narayana who agrees to fulfil Vashishta’s wish. And much to everyone’s amazement Ila the princess gets transformed into a mighty son called Sudyumna.

Ila becomes Sudyumna

Everyone is happy when they see this divine transformation. Things are fine for a long time. One day, Sudyumna mounts a horse and goes hunting deep into a forest along with his courtiers. They reach an enchanted clearing and are amazed at the splendour of the place. They do not know that this is Shiva's and Parvati's forest of love, the Sharavana. So the minute Sudyumna and his courtiers enter the forest they all get transformed into women. Even their horses are transformed into mares.

Sudyumna and his courtiers go around from one forest to another after that for several months with the hope of regaining their manhood. But in vain.

What happens is this. They meet other handsome Gandharvas along the way. The Gandharvas fall in love with the beautiful courtiers who are all women now. Sudyumna's courtiers decide to get married to these Gandharvas for they know that no one will recognize them or believe their strange story if they go back to their kingdom.

Sudyumna becomes Ila again

Sudyumna is now a woman called Ila. And she continues to live a nomadic life. One day, she comes across Soma Deva's (Moon God) ashram. She finds his handsome son Budha Deva (God of planet Mercury) near the ashram. Budha Deva is surprised to find such a lovely damsel in the middle of a forest and falls in love with her. Ila, who is full of womanly desires now is attracted to Budha Deva too. They decide to get married. In due course of time, Ila gives birth to a wonderful son called Pururavas.

Ila to Sudyumna, Sudyumna to Ila…forever….

But sadly, Ila is often tormented by her conflicting identity. Her memories of her life as Sudyumna often haunt her. So she meets Vashishta and discusses the matter with him.

Vashishta feels sorry for Ila. So he performs a penance to Lord Shiva. When the Lord appears before him, Vashishta requests him to transform Ila into Sudyumna again. He says that Sraddha Deva's kingdom would have no heir if Sudyumna continued to live as Illa.

Shiva says, "I cannot revoke the curse of the Sharavana that is now upon Sudyumna. The best I can do for him is to limit it to a bearable degree. Let Sudyumna be a man when the moon waxes and a woman when the moon wanes. That way he can rule his kingdom as a man at least for half the year." So saying Shiva disappears from there. And that is how Sudyumna rules his kingdom after that – both as a man and a woman.

Naturally, the people of the kingdom often discussed why their king transformed and behaved like a woman every now and then. But Sudyumna and Ila rule over the kingdom wisely. So over time, the backbiting dies down on its own and the people accept Sudyumna/ Ila as their king/queen.

The descendants of Sudyumna/Ila are the Chandravamshis(Lunar Dynasty) and the descendants of Ikshvaku are the Suryavamshis(Solar Dynasty).

At the root of this extremely interesting tale lies the conflict between male and female identities. Of what use is a man's intellect and rational thinking ability if he does not know how to complement it with a woman's emotions and sensitivity? The Sun (Suryavamshis) may shine as brightly as ever all through its life. It may create the day and nurture and sustain life. But it is the night ((Chandravamshis), the waxing and the waning of the moon that gives us that much-needed break/solace and evokes emotions within us. And it is in attempting to strike the right balance between such complementary facets of our lives that we evolve into better human beings.